

The Great Blue Heron

The Original Fish Finder

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As a young boy growing up in Tallapoosa County in the 1950s, a wading bird like the great blue heron would have been a sight to see. The widespread use of persistent agricultural pesticides and indiscriminate killing had reduced these birds to low numbers in some areas. Thankfully, wildlife conservation efforts have restored wading birds to stable populations across their ranges. Today, the sight of these beautiful birds is quite common on rivers, lakes, and other wetland habitats.

The great blue heron is the most widespread heron in North America today and also the largest, standing at almost four feet tall with a wingspan of nearly six feet. Despite its size, the adult bird weighs in at a mere five pounds, due to its thin, hollow bones. This weight-reducing feature greatly aids the bird in getting airborne. The great blue heron's coloration, as its name implies, is slate blue with white on the crown and throat. The breast is streaked black and white complemented by plume feathers protruding from its chest and back. Jet-black patches adorn the flanks, and adults have long black plumes above their eyes. The male and female are similar in appearance.

When in search of prey, the heron quietly stalks shallow waters with the aid of its long legs and large feet. Although fish make up the mainstay of its diet, the heron also dines on a variety of prey consisting of, but not limited to frogs, salamanders, crayfish, small mammals, and insects.



It is entertaining to watch a great blue patiently hunting for fish along the water's edge. The heron's stealthy physique gives it the edge and it will not be long before a catch is made. When fish are spied, the heron remains completely still, peering at the water with absolute concentration before delivering its lightning strike to unsuspecting prey. The heron actually uses its long yellowish spear-like bill as tongs to clamp down on, rather than stabbing its prey. Herons

are very territorial of their fishing grounds and quick to chase other herons away.

A unique physical feature of the heron is a specialized neck vertebra. This vertebra allows the heron to curl its neck up into an "S" shape, which aids it in delivering a strong accurate strike at prey. This feature also aids the bird when in flight by allowing the heron to fold its long neck back.

The great blue heron is mostly a loner until March when mating season begins. At this time herons become social, forming colonies and constructing a number of large stick nests high up in the branches of trees near good feeding grounds. The female lays a clutch of three to seven bluish-green eggs and incubation takes approximately four weeks.

The young are fed by regurgitation and fledge at approximately two months of age. Provided that habitat conditions do not degrade, herons will return to the same nesting area year after year. Active heron nesting colonies can be greatly impacted by human disturbance and should be avoided.

Thanks to conservation efforts, today the sight of the wading birds is common throughout the wetlands of North, Central, and South America. More importantly, good numbers of these beautiful birds are indicative of a healthy environment.

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